Journal of Social Science Education
Volume 7/8, Number 2/1, 2008/09, pp. 86-97

ISSN 1618-5293

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Civic Education with *The Simpsons*

Abstract

Impudent, disrespectful and packed with slapstick comedy – this is the most prominent and most controversial cartoon family in TV history: The Simpsons. Critics complain about the decay of manners and the offensive humor of the show. There is considerable potential for civic education in the yellow universe of The Simpsons, however. On the basis of three Simpsons-episodes this article analyzes the depiction of elections and electoral races in a media democracy. This analysis aims at extracting critical positions from the satiric presentation of debates, media events and political rhetoric and connecting them to real campaigns in Germany and the USA. The examples are supposed to illustrate that The Simpsons do provide critical access to understanding campaigns in media societies – despite all satiric exaggeration of real events. Furthermore, the article shows that the series does not only comment critically on almost any event of social relevance, but also, more importantly, how we can make these comments work in civic education.

Contents

Keywords

Civic education, the Simpsons, election, election campaign, media democracy, politics

“The nation needs to be closer to *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*.” (George H.W. Bush 1992, zit. n. Simpsons Archive 1998)
The Simpsons – everyone knows them and even those who don’t appreciate them very much, like former President Bush, cannot evade their social importance and therefore have to face up to the show. Contrary to Ex-President George H.W. Bush this article doesn’t look at *The Simpsons* as a destructive force but wants to point out that they can provide help, especially for younger people, in understanding political procedures and furthermore reflect on and evaluate these procedures critically. And if they are able to achieve that, *The Simpsons* should definitely be dealt with in civic education.

This article is divided into five parts. First of all the family and the Springfield universe will be presented shortly. The second part provides information and opinions concerning *The Simpsons* as a media phenomenon, successful all over the world, and reaching and enchanting young people, especially. It describes the role politics play among the many

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issues dealt with on the show. By looking more closely at three exemplary episodes, the article analyzes how campaigns and elections are presented in *The Simpsons*. Afterwards means and methods will be described by which civic educators can work with *The Simpsons* – and especially the three presented episodes. Finally a short conclusion briefly summarizes the results.

1. What Is All the Fuzz About, Anyway?

The Simpsons live in the small town of Springfield which stands exemplary for every small town in America and therefore has never been located in any particular federal state. It represents its own microcosm, has its supermarket and shopping centre, hospital, church, elementary school, bar, radio and TV station and – as its economic center and universal employer – a nuclear power plant. The town provides for everything its inhabitants need to live, and anything that matters to them happens within Springfield's borders.
So does the life of the Simpson family, which – at first sight – doesn't differ greatly from all the other inhabitants'. We have parents, three children, and a grandfather in a retirement home. Father Homer works at the nuclear power plant, mother Marge stays at home and cares for the house and children. The older children, Bart (10) and Lisa (8), go to Springfield elementary school while baby Maggie always stays close to her mother. The family goes to church every Sunday and participates in community life, but after all the Simpsons are not as ordinary or unspectacular as a family as this first description might suggest.
Homer, head of the family, is quite dull and lazy. His favorite activities are drinking beer and eating donuts. His dedicated wife cares for her family, but from time to time she tries to break out of her life that is all too often shaped by role clichés. Son Bart doesn't care about school at all. He is the sworn enemy of the principal and almost every other person in Springfield as he loves playing tricks on people; sometimes even on members of his family. His younger sister Lisa is presented completely different: she is a genius at school, devoted to jazz music and in most cases she acts as the family's moral, environmental and political conscience, but she is all too often misunderstood by those she loves most.
The further set of acquaintances of the Simpson family comprises besides a formerly illegal immigrant, an alcoholic, a barkeeper, a priest, a religious fanatic and a soulless corporate manager, Springfield's celebrities from TV, showbiz and local politics. These acquaintances already define the wide range of topics the show addresses. Beyond the already impressively comprehensive usual 'cast', new characters are introduced, whenever the theme of an episode renders it necessary.

2. *The Simpsons* as a TV Phenomenon

The Simpsons are a media success story. Airing first in 1987 as a filler in the Tracey Ullman Show on FOX, the yellow family became a cartoon series of its own in 1989. Nineteen seasons have been broadcast when a movie starring the Springfield heroes was released in summer 2007. And the fan base is not limited to the USA. A recent German study about the media use of teenagers found that *The Simpsons* is the most popular cartoon show *as well as* the most popular TV show in general among participants (JIM-Studie 2006, 25). It also reveals the interesting fact that *The Simpsons* are more popular with audiences of increasing age and level of education (JIM-Studie 2006, 25).
These results are confirmed by authors who point out the ambivalence of the show, which – at first sight – was often falsely considered a children's program. While Tuncel and Rauscher

(2002, 154) observe a one-sided perception of *The Simpsons* as a kids program especially in Germany, Dörner (2000, 349) says that *The Simpsons* contain slapstick for the kids as well as unerring satire for (young) adults. According to Cantor (1999) the show can be looked at in two different ways: as an intellectual satire or as simple comedy. It is a quality of the show that "it defends the common man against the intellectual but in a way that both the common man and the intellectual can understand and enjoy" (Cantor 1999, 747). Tuncel and Rauscher (2002, 154) point out that slapstick rules the show only at first sight – "bei näherer Betrachtung ist jedoch auch eine Politsatire mit teils sehr bissigen Sozialkommentaren zu entdecken, die sich als Subtext durch die Serie zieht und in manchen Episoden ganz im Vordergrund steht."

The audience apprehends *The Simpsons* as a realistic and adequate depiction of an American family – an obvious challenge to the stereotypical image of traditional family idyll (Dörner 2000, 350 und 355). The show offers a potential for identification for the crowds (Dörner 2000, 355): a family that many viewers can relate to, and which makes the situations and plots of the show feel familiar (Cantor 1999, 735). The Springfield microcosm can be understood as a distillate of social reality that actively seeks interaction with the real world, for example when Bart Simpson responds to former President Bush's *The Waltons* comparison (Tuncel, Rauscher 2002, 154 f.)

As far as the show's topics are concerned anything can happen in Springfield and almost any issue you can imagine has already been subject to at least one *Simpsons* episode. But there are some major themes that often emerge in different forms and contexts or are hinted at in nearly every episode. Objecting to George H.W. Bush's assumptions, Cantor considers family and family values to be the principal themes of the show. The family is considered to be the core of a larger community and even where clichés of traditional family life are satirized the value of the nuclear family is held in high esteem (Cantor 1999, 735-737). Every Simpson eventually wants to stick together with and care for the others and even if they fail it is always shown that they tried their very best (Cantor 1999, 738 f.). It can also be seen as a sign of approval of an issue's significance if it is frequently satirized (Cantor 1999, 742).

In Springfield's everyday life religion plays a major role which Cantor views as a more realistic depiction of American everyday life than other TV series are able to provide (Cantor 1999, 741). *The Simpsons*' satire also regularly mocks the police, the justice and schooling systems, psychology, entertainment and television (Dörner 2000, 357-359). Even *The Simpsons*' home channel FOX has to take side blows quite frequently.

Besides the family theme one of the major topics of *The Simpsons* is politics, including institutions, actors and processes (Dörner 2000, 359). "Politik ist bei den Simpsons nahezu omnipräsent" (Dörner 2000, 352), whether it is in terms of political comments of Springfield's inhabitants, appearances of former (or historic) presidents or TV reports. The motto here is to remind that "the people in power don't always have your best interest in mind" (Groening, zit. n. Cantor 1999, 745), as Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons* is quoted. It is safe to say that the central pattern of depicting politics in *The Simpsons* is: Wherever institutions fail, individuals have to take over responsibility to straighten up things again (Dörner 2000, 359). Pursuing this principle "The show has constantly tried to raise political awareness, in as gentle and non-hectoring [a] way as possible" (Gleeson 1998).

Political issues are sometimes connected with partisan politics, but after all the series does not show any considerable partisan bias (Armstrong 2005, 10; Cantor 1999, 735). Gleeson (1998) correctly detects that "It targets hypocrisy, corruption and institutionalized laziness wherever it finds them", no matter if the show has to affront a political party, an economic or social lobby or even religious communities, direct allusions to real nuisance are not scarce (Tuncel, Rauscher 2002, 158).

Usually, with *The Simpsons* all politics are local. All the relevant political institutions are within one's reach, so people are not governed by a remote faceless bureaucracy (Cantor 1999, 743). Moreover, Springfield's inhabitants are involved in local political decision-making that directly affects them as observed by Cantor: "Everywhere one looks in Springfield, one sees a surprising degree of local control and autonomy" (Cantor 1999, 743). This implies, of course, that way more things are regulated on the local level than could realistically be – the media, economy and especially politics (Cantor 1999, 744). Tuncel and Rauscher (1999, 159) confirm this: "Während die Folgen im Vordergrund US-amerikanische Themen be-

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handeln, zeigen sie doch zugleich das Funktionieren gesellschaftlicher Mythen und Phänomene sowie ihre Bedeutung für Gesellschaften im allgemeinen.“ The depiction of social life and community cohesion may sometimes appear anachronistic or unrealistically traditional, but it shows how society could work and could be able to improve its own living circumstances. Maybe the Springfield community is more exclusively self-involved than would be possible in real life, but in this shifting for themselves and in avowing for the matters concerning their private and social lives, the values of solidarity and co-determination among responsible citizens are revealed: “*The Simpsons* is based on distrust of power and especially of power remote from ordinary people. The show celebrates genuine community, …” (Cantor 1999, 745).

3. Politics and *The Simpsons*

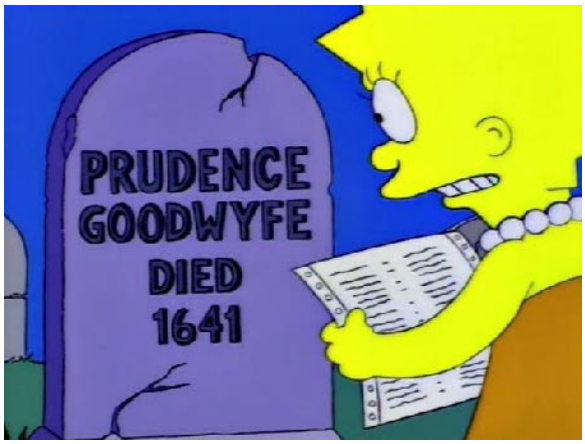
The main political issue addressed by this article is campaigning and elections in media democracies. Our aim is to show that *The Simpsons* do not just provide trivial entertainment but encourage their audience to look closer at how politicians act and interact with the media, especially when elections are due. To do so, we selected three *Simpsons*-episodes for the prominence they grant to the theme of campaigns and elections, which we will shortly summarize in this chapter: “Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish” (season 2, episode 1, aired as episode 4), “Sideshow Bob Roberts” (season 6, episode 5), and “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington” (season 14, episode 14). In the next chapter, we will try to analyze how major characteristics associated with modern campaigns are depicted in those episodes.

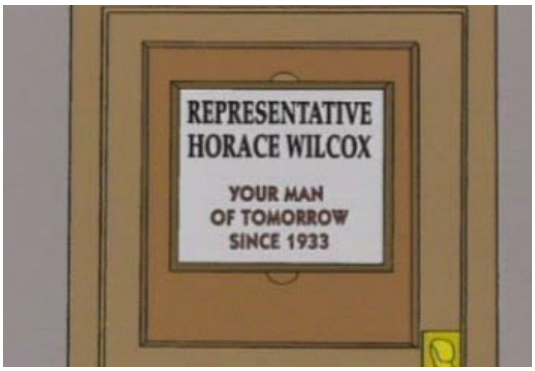
In “Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish”, nuclear power plant owner C. Montgomery Burns, failing to comply even with minimal security standards, is beset by inspectors (who he fails to bribe) and the media as three-eyed fish emerge in nearby waters. He decides to run against incumbent Governor Mary Bailey in the upcoming gubernatorial election to protect his interests against her policies and, advised by a team of professional consultants, starts an image campaign to defame his opponent and improve his own approval ratings. When, down the campaign trail, polling suggests that Burns is loosing touch with the common man, a dinner at the Simpsons’ house is set up, to show him with an employee’s family. Burns however – live on the air – fails to sustain his claim of the three eyed fish being totally harmless, as Marge Simpson serves one of them for dinner and dares him to eat it. The media instantly turn against Burns, his favorable poll ratings collapse immediately, and he looses the election.

In “Sideshow Bob Roberts”, Sideshow Bob, Krusty the Clown’s former sidekick, convicted criminal, and Bart Simpson’s mortal enemy, calls conservative talk-radio host Birch Barlow on the air and claims to be incarcerated unjustly (Bob: “Convicted of a crime I didn’t even commit – *attempted murder*.”). Barlow sparks a public campaign calling for Bob’s amnesty, and Mayor

Quimby, infamous for his volatile policy and sudden swings adapting to public mood ("Well, if that is the way the winds are blowing…"), decides to pardon him. Bob, just out of prison, is made the Republicans' candidate for the mayor's office, running a campaign against the very man who pardoned him. He wins in a landslide, getting 100 percent of the vote. Incumbent Quimby takes only one percent, and it is even suggested by news anchor Kent Brockman, that those are owed to the margin of error of one percent. Lisa and Bart Simpson however succeed in having Bob convicted for election fraud, as they find out that the ballot record lists – publicly, on top of everything – all dead people from Springfield cemetery as Bob voters.

In "Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington", Krusty the Clown is urged to run for Congress by the Simpsons, who suffer from immense flight noise since a major flight path was moved over their house. The election is necessary because Republican longtime incumbent (His door sign reads: "Your Man of Tomorrow Since 1933) Horace Wilcox dies from a hart attack when he is approached by Homer and Marge. Krusty gains the support of the Republicans and, after a suboptimal start, his campaign gains momentum with the help of Lisa, who advices him on public relations matters. Krusty wins the election (thinking, at first, that he is a senator now) but has a bad start in Washington, realizing that only long-time incumbents are entitled to realize their policies. Luckily, the Simpsons, who followed Krusty to Washington, meet a cleaning person there who, as Marge says, "looks like Walter Mondale"[1] – response cleaning person: "Uh, yeah, *looks like.*" He helps them to get a bill passed that bans the air traffic over Springfield to a different area by attaching it to the "flags-for-orphans-bill", which is impossible to fail in the vote.





[1] Walter Mondale was the 1984 challenger of Ronald Reagan for the presidency, which he lost.

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4. Election Campaigns in Springfield and other Media Democracies

Modern election campaigns are characterized by five major strategies: *symbolic politics*, *personalization*, *issue management* (like agenda setting, agenda cutting, priming, and framing), *negative campaigning*, and *bandwagon-* or *momentum-strategies* (compare Schoen 2005, 506 ff.). All of these strategies are closely related to the critical role the media plays in modern representative democracies and they are subject to satirical criticism in the *Simpsons* episodes we discussed. The relationship of politics and the media itself is a major theme of the three selected episodes. The only major aspects of modern campaigns that do not play a significant role in the episodes are the Internet, targeting and direct mail.
All the candidates (except perhaps Mr. Burns' opponent Gov. Mary Bailey) perform or promise acts of merely symbolic politics. Mayor Quimby, for instance, promises to the residents of the Springfield retirement home to name his major future project, a new express way, after Matlock, their favorite TV character, to please them.

Krusty, Bob and Mr. Burns are portrayed in a personal rather than political way by their own campaigns and they attack their opponents in a personal way rather than challenging their policies, most of the time. Also in the Democratic nomination race going on in the USA at the time of writing, issues seem to be trailing behind personality. As Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama promote hardly distinguishable policies, the question of personality becomes decisive. By February 2008, many observers conclude that in the personality-battle, the Clinton-experience seems to trail behind the Obama-feeling (compare Kister 2008, 4 for instance).
Issue management plays a major role in "Sideshow Bob Roberts" for instance. Birch Barlow (conservative talk-radio host with Springfield's KBBL) sets the issue of a pardon for Bob on the agenda and little later the paper announces that the Bob Pardon has become the "# 1 local issue" edging out the "No Fat Chicks"-Ordinance, more probably than not a Quimby initiative. Issue management also occurs when Quimby is portrayed as 'weak on crime' by Bob's campaign *for pardoning Bob*, playing the Republican security-issue card. Other than that, however, Bob runs solely on image and entertainment, ridiculing his opponent and critics.

In the run-up to the German Bundestag election in 2002 chancellor Gerhard Schröder skillfully applied issue management – agenda-setting and agenda-surfing to be exact. By making his objection to the upcoming war in Iraq a central issue in media coverage and rallies, Schröder perfectly connected his own name and policy to the dominating public opinion of the time. Also, voters responded strongly to the floods along the Elbe and Mulde in 2002 and SPD-politicians succeeded in connecting the response to these natural disasters to their central theme of solidarity (compare Brettschneider 2005, 499.). Thus the party was able to win the election against all (polling) odds.
Bob's weak-on-crime ad is also an example of negative campaigning as is the depiction of a massively biased Fox News broadcast in "Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington". During that show, Krusty is presented in front of a stars and stripes banner with a shining halo over his head while his Democratic opponent is shown with a flag of the USSR and devil's horns. Simultaneously anti-Democrat text messages (like: "Do Democrats cause cancer?", "Study:

92 percent of Democrats are gay", "JFK posthumously joins Republican Party") are running across the screen. Also the TV host already addresses Krusty as "Congressman" before the election, calling his Democratic opponent "comrade" or simply "that guy". This negative campaign, however, is somewhat different, as it is not (at least not directly) organized by the Krusty camp but by the news broadcaster, i.e. it is a free media campaign as opposed to the paid media ad against Mayor Quimby.

Negative campaigning, although often considered a filthy business, does play a major role in real-world campaigns too, not least because it often generates free media, even after being taken off the air; consider the 2004 'swift boat ad' against Senator Kerry for instance. And although the trend has not yet gained the power it has in the United States, negative campaigning and negative ads, albeit probably not to the same degree, might become an increasingly important factor in German campaigns too. Consider the 2006 ad of the Greens for the Landtagswahl in Baden-Württemberg for instance, a cartoon ad, which depicts competing parties' senior officials' positions on fiscal spending, genetically modified food, nuclear power and immigration as irresponsible (http://www.gruene-bw.de/service/spots.html).

Momentum or bandwagon effects are also a theme in all the episodes. As soon as one of the campaigns gains momentum, the press as well as Springfieldians are very eager to follow the trend and hop on the bandwagon. This behavior is ridiculed by the Simpsons-writers by comic exaggeration but it seems to be quite common in actual races. Quimby's clear defeat (with only 1 percent of the vote) doesn't make news anchor Kent Brockman suspicious but leads him to remind his viewers that there is a margin of error of 1 percent, implying that Quimby probably has gotten none of the votes. Also note the newspaper headline in "Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish": "Burns Bandwagon Rolls On – Latest Poll Puts Him at 22 Percent".

Momentum and/or *bandwagon* effects do play a major role in recent and current political campaigns. As of February 2008, in the race for the Democratic nomination for the '08 presidential elections, Barack Obama is the candidate most frequently associated with *momentum*. When he beat Hillary Clinton in the first democratic caucuses in Iowa in January 2008, the former underdog suddenly looked like the sure winner in New Hampshire in all the polls. Obama lost there and the pollsters' overestimation of the momentum/bandwagon-effect was revealed. But still, Obama is performing very well on the campaign trail after 'Tsunami

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Tuesday' not least because he and his team know how to 'ride the wave'. Obama claims to lead a movement, more than a mere campaign, and the Obama bandwagon attracts many voters. Obama, on February 12, after winning the Potomac Primaries, and thus 8 consecutive primaries and caucuses since Tsunami Tuesday: "[…] And though we won in Washington, D.C., this movement won't stop until there is change in Washington, D.C., and tonight we're on our way" (Steinhauser, Mooney, Tavcar 2008.).
"For one thing, if this is an election where a candidate wins by virtue of being seen as winning – a definition of momentum – that would mean that voters in coming states would be influenced by the outcome of earlier races. And Mr. Obama might then be in a position to encroach on Mrs. Clinton's firewall of Texas and Ohio" (Nagourney 2008).
In the three episodes the media repeatedly fall prey to those strategies, uncritically reproducing stereotypes and untested rumors enforced by the campaigns. Thus it is implied that the media are highly vulnerable to instrumentalization attempts by politicians and campaigns, which current research in media-politics relations largely denies. Rather the media-politics relation is described as a complex and dynamic exchange arrangement with mutual dependencies and inferiority and superiority oscillating between both sides (compare Pfetsch 2005, 34 f.).
On the other hand, the media coverage is depicted as *the* overwhelming (almost exclusive) and very direct influence on voting behavior and thus the media are described as very influential and powerful. In reality, media influence on voting behavior is significant but a lot more diverse complicated than suggested (compare for instance Brettschneider 2005).
Krusty, arriving in Washington and confronted with real politics, experiences firsthand the differences between the media-cycle and the policy-cycle (or: "Politikdarstellung" and "Politikherstellung", compare Sarcinelli 2002, 66) a typical aspect of media democracy. The media professional Krusty is shocked by the slow workings of actual politics after a campaign of merely displaying politics.

The Simpsons make politics visible for young media consumers in very many episodes. They show critical aspects and tendencies and they point out – although often more subtly – possible ways to counter them. All of the three episodes discussed in this article address critical circumstances of modern election campaigns in media democracies: the danger of an emphasis of entertainment over policy, of appearances over programs, of image over integrity. And they urge citizens to observe closely and critically what politicians as well as the media present to them. Thus, The Simpsons go beyond slapstick comedy to encourage critical citizenship and participation, rather than merely ridiculing politicians and the media. Without suggesting an Americanization of election campaigns, we believe that many themes of the show are suitable for German campaigns too. Of course, civic educators have to address major differences, like the very distinct role of parties in German campaigns. The critical challenge for civic educators is to effectively incorporate The Simpsons to classrooms and seminars, not just providing a funny diversion but serious learning opportunities. Some suggestions of how to achieve this objective are subject matter of the final paragraphs of this article.

5. The Simpsons in Civic Education – Methods and Exercises

Besand (2005, 425 ff.) urges civic educators to go beyond the classic print media used in classrooms (such as caricatures, newspaper articles, and books) to incorporate audio-visual, multimedia, and entertainment formats into civic education. Those media, usually associated with a decay of the political (compare Besand 2005, 425), need to be a part of education as

they are here to stay as a major part of children's and in fact society's leisure-time activities. Gardner also prefers incorporating the influences of mass-media and consumer society to schools than to exclude them from teaching and pretending they would not exist (compare Gardner 1993, 277). Although clearly entertaining, *The Simpsons* are certainly more than a piece of slapstick comedy and as a political satire, the show need not be interpreted as a sign of decay but the creators can be viewed as role models in critical citizenship.

In this section we would like to propose a couple of methods to use in classrooms or seminars to work with The Simpsons. The episodes certainly provide a starting point for discussion or simply a motivating introduction to the topic, but you can also thoroughly analyze the narratives, draw conclusions about the depiction of the political process, and compare those to real-world events. As the show is originally English-language, you should consider inter-subject cooperation with colleagues teaching English, especially when teaching older students. Think about a week or two devoted to 'Democratic competition in Germany and the USA' for example.

In classroom or seminar discussions of the episodes it seems fit to aspire constructivist approaches, as the show constantly addresses and satirizes scripts and schemes that prevail in thinking about politicians, the media, and the political process. Among the major themes addressed by the show are scripts of *the media*, *media formats*, and *journalism* (in a very self-reflexive and self-critical way), *Washington*, *politicians*, especially *candidates*, the *political process*, and especially *political campaigns*. These scripts need to be discussed with students. How are common scripts portrayed in the show? What is *real* or *true* about them, and where is reality exaggerated and satirized?

It is therefore essential to provide a learning environment that incorporates, takes seriously, and appreciates a plurality of individual notions of the political narratives of the show. Civic education has to provide irritation and perturbation to allow critical interpretations of scripts that occur within the show as well as in classroom discussions. Civic education must not least be an opportunity to question critically, challenge, and ultimately remodel prevailing scripts.

Mock debates or talk shows are an opportunity to acquire deeper understandings of the role of media in campaigns. Have two or more groups of students prepare one candidate for a show or debate and one group prepare the moderation. What pieces of political rhetoric are necessary to come across well, and what are the phrases you don't want to say because they sound odd or won't be understood by your audience? What are your major claims, which are the topics you want to discuss, and which topics would you like to avoid? What kind of body-language makes you look better than your opponent? In general, what are the Dos and Don'ts of campaign showdowns? Watch debates and shows to analyze the pros and compare their performance to yours.

Modern forms of media and campaign communication can be dealt with by having students, individually or in groups, write campaign-blogs, tracing the ups and downs of the portrayed campaigns. One blog could, for example, criticize Krusty's sexism from the point of view of the "league of female voters". Also produce and discuss possible responses by the campaign team. Have one group write a blog for "Young Republicans supporting Bob", another group responding on the imaginary campaign website www.quimbyformayor.com. The domain still seems to be available at the time of writing – if you have a project budget available and feel comfortable with the technology (or have an

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interested colleague who does), design a campaign website with your students and compare it to real ones.

The texts should reflect subjective points of view and the dramaturgy of the episodes they refer to, communication strategies should also play a role. Even if students proceed largely intuitively, address and discuss possible strategies with learners – think, for instance: target groups, key demographics (young voters, women, independents, possible swing voters…).

If we believe learning to be triggered by experience and discursive interpretation, role-playing seems a very powerful macro-method in teaching political processes. Students can experience a change of roles if they have the chance to take the role of strategists who plan a political campaign and we can include various micro-methods from reading and interpretation tasks to creative processes of producing campaign materials or advertisements.

Role-plays provide an experience that can help develop an understanding of necessities and restrictions that actors in the political sphere are confronted with. Students can experience strategic thinking, and they can question or even remodel some assumptions they hold about politicians and the political competition. Role-play exercises help understanding politicians and might make students more empathetic but, at the same time, they raise critical awareness of how campaigns try to influence the media and electorate. Thus it also fosters alertness and a critical political literacy.

Our experience tells us that students are surprisingly confident in taking the role of campaign planners and design posters and stickers, or plan and perform political ads (or think websites again). With relatively few instructions provided beforehand, even tenth-graders, far from voting age, appear to have intuitive but surprisingly profound understandings of the workings of the political competition as well as relevant political issues.

The fact that such a task requires more than topical and political knowledge within a team accounts for the incorporation and nurturing of different types of students' intelligences, thus fostering the motivation of individuals and groups to learn self-responsibly. The proposed exercise requires, in addition to mere topical knowledge, verbal-linguistic intelligence (in understanding instructional texts, formulating slogans and claims), logical-mathematical intelligence (in analysis and in anticipating strategic aspects of campaign planning), spatial intelligence (e.g. drawing skills in the production of banners or posters), physical-kinesthetic intelligence (acting performance skills), and (as a group exercise involving individual learners) interpersonal as well as intrapersonal intelligence. Thus it incorporates at least six of the eight to eight and a half intelligences described by Howard Gardner (55-58, 69) and accounts for the plurality of students' capabilities and talents. Many students can bring their particular strengths into the process productively and are highly motivated to do so, which improves working atmosphere, results, and fosters individual as well as group learning.

Besides, it is a lot of fun for students as well as educators to see, for instance, the ad-performances which are sometimes a little ironic but reflect a process of identification with, and deeper understanding of roles that most of the participants will probably never have considered to take in real life. The discussion and reflection of the intentions and results of the groups is critical in framing the exercise with real world observations and patterns, and in transferring acquired knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

The Simpsons are a part of youth culture (compare JIM-Studie) and thus they help us to pick up young learners where they are. *The Simpsons* can bridge the gap between students' personal lives and topics of civic education in classrooms and seminars. And if we do a good job in providing opportunities for students to figure out and elaborate on the political narrative and relevance of an exemplary episode of the show, we have reason to expect them to integrate what they have learned into their private media behavior, thus evolving from mere spectators to critical observes of political satire at first and probably also of politics itself.

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